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# Spectators, Sponsors, or World Travelers? Engaging with Personal Narratives of Others through the *Afghan Women's Writing Project*

Bethany Mannon

**T**he popularity of life writing in the past three decades has corresponded with a proliferation of life writing online. Anecdotes and photos of lived experiences characterize users' interactions on social networks, blogs, and projects like *PostSecret* and *Humans of New York*. This widespread use of personal narrative online has given rise to digital storytelling projects "outside the boundaries of mainstream media institutions" (Couldry 386). Independently, in conjunction with NGOs, or with support from educational institutions, these projects mobilize dozens, sometimes hundreds, of participants to share accounts of their experiences and to engage with others across national borders. With titles like *The Everyday Sexism Project* and *Women Win*, these story archives create a growing vein of material for studying the confluence of life narrative and activism online.

The *Afghan Women's Writing Project (AWWP)*, one story collection particularly visible to US audiences, seeks to intervene in the lives of participants and influence discussions about gender and human rights. *AWWP* offers online and in-person writing workshops that site editors describe as empowering to women and girls who were previously silenced. Writers' poems and prose narratives circulate in email newsletters, in the books *The Sky Is a Nest of Swallows* (2012) and *Washing the Dust from Our Hearts* (2015), and through readings hosted by community organizations. Readers also find *AWWP* stories on the website [awwproject.org](http://awwproject.org), which had published the writings of 154 participants at the time of this study, and editors encourage visitors to support writers through donations and by posting comments. While readers in any region can explore the story

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collection, *AWWP*'s history and mission statements envision Western readers as the audience most curious about Afghan women and girls and also as those best positioned to support their empowerment.

*AWWP* founders and editors envision the project as a site of transnational encounters between writers and readers. Gillian Whitlock argues that life writing can "personalize and humanize categories of people whose experiences are frequently unseen and unheard," and *AWWP* certainly participates in this mission (3). However, feminist scholarship on humanitarian intervention demonstrates that such efforts run the risk of perpetuating racist and sexist assumptions and disregarding the specificity of women's situations (Jaggar; Grewal and Kaplan; Gilmore and Marshall). Furthermore, *AWWP* creates meaning by framing the rhetorical work of non-Western women for consumption by Western audiences. Scholarship on life writing and feminist rhetoric informs my analysis of personal narrative as a feminist practice. Wendy Hesford's work on human rights and life narratives provides an important reference point for studying *AWWP*, as does Mary Queen's analysis of modes of digital circulation that often "construct and reinforce binary oppositions and rhetorics of superiority" ("Transnational Feminist Rhetorics" 472). My analysis focuses on one field of rhetorical action: the website where writers' stories first appear and find a public. This article furthers conversations on women's life writing and feminist rhetorics; in particular, I consult scholarship on transnational feminism that forcefully critiques "colonial discourses and hegemonic First World formations that wittingly or unwittingly lead to the oppression and exploitation of many women" (Grewal and Kaplan 2) and works to "understand the material conditions that structure women's lives in diverse locations" (17).

Life writing can reveal much about those material conditions, but it can also be implicated in hierarchies and rhetorics of superiority. I propose three concepts—spectatorship, sponsorship, and world traveling—as methodologies for studying the cultural currency of life stories in humanitarian efforts and the ways that projects shape readers' interpretations of personal narratives. These three conceptual tools reveal tensions between *AWWP* participants' writing and narratives that the organization uses to make their stories legible to readers. All three support a productive analysis of a neglected dimension of women's life writing: the conditions that shape readers' interactions with writers and texts. In particular, they illuminate the interactions between actors in this dynamic form of activism and writing. My aim is to expand understandings of these concepts to include contexts other than those for which they were originally theorized. I am particularly interested in the possibilities of world traveling, when readers engage with narratives to understand writers in terms of their own worlds and incorporate self-analysis to see themselves in terms of the writers' worlds

(Madison 124). Digital storytelling projects invite this response by crafting narratives of self and place that foreground the writer's subjectivity and convey the specificity of lived experience. However, *AWWP* structures readers' engagements by situating them as spectators to and sponsors of Afghan women's writing. Editors use a narrative of women in crisis to shape affective responses, working at cross-purposes to many of the writers. These forms of encounter reinscribe essentializing discourses about non-Western women that scholarship on transnational feminism and feminist rhetoric has fought to remove from the conversation.

I began by reading the *AWWP* story archive, noting its organization and the variety of topics authors select. In their introductory comments, editors hold up human rights and the burqa as particularly important. To analyze (in)congruities between writers' stories and editors' narratives, I used the site search feature to locate stories that deal with these two topics; I then re-read with this focus. Writers choose other rich topics—such as economics and motherhood—but editors do not treat them as central issues, and they do not highlight the divergence between writers' and editors' rhetorics. For these reasons, this article examines *AWWP*'s treatment of human rights and the burqa, particularly the ways editors and writers invite readers to engage with stories. I preface that discussion by elaborating on the concepts of spectatorship, sponsorship, and world traveling, and I conclude by proposing ways project editors could better challenge readers to listen carefully and learn from *AWWP* writers.

#### MODELS FOR ENGAGING WITH WRITERS AND STORIES

Spectatorship—a concept that Boltanski and Chouliaraki explore in televised news coverage of suffering—governs many readers' engagement with *AWWP* stories. Boltanski theorizes spectatorship in response to proliferating NGOs and their accounts of humanitarian crises that reach affluent viewers. "What form can this commitment [to action] take," Boltanski asks, "when those called upon to act are thousands of miles away from the person suffering, comfortably installed in front of the television set in the shelter of the family living-room?" (xv). Such spectators envision two responses, sending money and speaking about what they have seen. Chouliaraki poses two questions to analyze the "spectator-sufferer" relationship that the media creates: "How close or how far away are spectators placed vis-à-vis sufferers? How are spectators 'imagined' as reacting vis-à-vis sufferers' misfortunes—look at it, feel for it, act on it?" (19). *AWWP* places writers in global narratives of humanitarian intervention and offer these ways to resolve readers' "incapacity to act on distant suffering" (Chouliaraki 46). And yet, as Boltanski and Chouliaraki show, a spectatorship model of reading

enables only connections that reinscribe political power and cultural difference (Chouliaraki 22).

Deborah Brandt's concept of literacy sponsors who "enable, support, teach, and model" reading and writing offers another conceptual framework for analyzing reading practices. *AWWP* editors and readers—as well as workshop mentors, whose role is only occasionally visible—"set the terms for access to literacy" and represent the "causes into which people's literacy usually gets recruited" (19). While Brandt theorizes sponsorship in the context of literacy and writing practices in the United States, she names a source of political and ideological influence that is present in digital storytelling projects as well.

Editorial decisions guide readers to experience these acts of self-representation—to read stories and connect to them affectively—as spectators and as sponsors. They "fix" writers "within neoliberal frameworks of 'democracy' and 'women's rights,'" erasing the multiple ways those writers "create and claim identities, agency, and political activism" (Queen 471). Personal narratives collected and circulated within humanitarian organizations are vulnerable to such framing, but life writing can also gain rhetorical power by foregrounding the writer's subjectivity. *AWWP* asks site visitors to read these identity performances in a third, contrasting way: as world travelers. I draw this concept from Maria Lugones's model of identification, particularly her assertion that "by traveling to their 'world' we can understand *what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*. Only when we have traveled to each other's 'worlds' are we fully subjects to each other" (97, italics in the original). Lugones uses "world-traveling" to name the strategies women of color use for survival in the mainstream. Applied to online writing, this form of engagement asks readers to listen and learn rather than evaluate or rescue.

An alternative to spectatorship or sponsorship, world traveling asks readers to examine ideologies that shape their identification with personal narratives, including ideologies that create the framework of the project. Elaborating on Lugones, Allison Weir and D. Soyini Madison show how world traveling challenges white women to "witness and engage the Other as a *subject*" (Madison 124) and open themselves to being changed by learning about others' worlds and their own complicity in systems of inequality and oppression (Weir, *Identities and Freedom* 78). Weir proposes this concept in response to debates about identification, especially Mohanty's seminal critique of identification as "an act of appropriation based on a presumption of sameness" (Weir, "Global Feminism" 123). Weir responds to Mohanty and others by arguing for a positive view of identity in feminist philosophy, and, expanding on Lugones, defines identification as "reconstituting myself, my identity, through traveling to your world" (125). I agree with Weir and Madison, and I add that personal narratives open

opportunities for engaging the writer as a subject who observes, analyzes, and strategically represents her world. While stories can in some cases reinforce a presumption of sameness (as Theresa Kulbaga shows), they also provide a public space for writers to construct detailed and deliberate images of their worlds.

In January 2010, *AWWP* published the anonymous story, “I Am For Sale, Who Will Buy Me?” Heroine Anonymous, as one reader calls the author, begins, “I used to think big.” She describes her childhood, when her father encouraged her education and declined marriage offers. After he died, she divided her teaching salary between “house expenses” and college tuition. “During these years, I was the poorest student in my class,” she writes, adding, “I spent days without breakfast or lunch, but I felt happy for my education.” Heroine Anonymous continued to receive marriage proposals but rejected them. She explains, “Most wanted me to stop my studies and never work outside the home.” Heroine Anonymous laments the changes to her family after her father died: “the responsibility for me fell to my brothers, who grew up under the Taliban government and were influenced by it. Now I live with three Talibs and I must obey what they say. I am not like a girl in the house, but a slave.” She hopes to earn a PhD and establish “an independent life, standing on [her] own feet,” but shares that her brothers had arranged her marriage to a wealthy, conservative cousin. Facing the prospect of living in a family where women cannot leave the house, she writes, “I think if this happens, I won’t stay in this world.”

The day *AWWP* published “I Am For Sale,” twenty readers posted comments. Eighty responded within a week, a large number at this point in the project. By contrast, a poem and a story published two days later had two and five comments respectively. The online space facilitates comments, sharing, and reposting to platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Readers comment with their affective responses and, sometimes, with offers of financial support. One reader, “Sally,” posted in response to “I Am For Sale,” “I feel so incredibly sad reading your story and so pitifully powerless as I respond from a world away. I do believe, however, that this courageous act of sharing your story can make good things happen.” Robyn Cobb writes, “I will also link to your post on my blog. My thoughts and prayers are with you, please don’t give up!” Several denounce Islam; Paul writes, “These Muslims. The enlightened ones ‘let’ their women wear scarves and maybe a [sic] have a job. The rest treat them like broodstock and cattle.” Twenty commenters offered to send money, and two asked Heroine Anonymous to send her CV. Not all *AWWP* stories evoke so many responses or such strong reactions, but “I Am For Sale” demonstrates the affective connections and interventions that personal narratives can bring about. Further, this example illustrates the interactivity that the website encourages and two primary ways that readers absorb and respond to narratives of crisis.

A follow-up essay, "I Am For Sale, Part II," by Heroine Anonymous from July 2010 indicates that a fundraising campaign took place and that she bought her freedom. In this regard, readers' recognition of her plight and the sharing and reposting of her story generated a successful intervention. However, Heroine Anonymous reveals that her situation grew worse after she bought her autonomy and married a man of her choice. Her offended uncle sought to buy her as a slave and held her brother hostage until she appeared before an assembly of elders. When she refused, the uncle cut off three of her brother's fingers and demanded that her husband give him a sister as a slave. Paralyzed in this situation, Heroine Anonymous writes that she now asks herself, "Did I deserve freedom so that another young girl must now give up hers? Did I deserve the freedom that cost my brother part of his body?" She concludes the essay, "[P]eople blame me for standing against my family, failing to respect my elders, and rejecting a life serving the husband my uncle chose for me whom I didn't love. Only my pen tolerates my choices. I bought my freedom, but violence still follows me, and I can't escape, and I still wish I was not a woman" ("I Am For Sale, Part II.").

Readers' responses to Heroine Anonymous's story failed to fundamentally change the situation. Neither spectatorship nor sponsorship solved her problem, and neither works to understand the social, legal, and economic systems preventing her autonomy. This failure does not mean that any action in such cases is futile, but it does expose the inadequacy of readers' immediate responses: writing encouragement, giving money, and isolating Islam as the single reason for her pain. This story challenges the project's creators and readers to reject the narrative that interacting through a website helps the writers who post their stories. As Lila Abu-Lughod argues, "[R]ather than clicking on a website to donate \$10 or flying to distant lands to bring school supplies to girls, and certainly before calling in military troops, we should take time to listen. . . . If we were to listen more closely, I believe we would discover that matters are not so simple" (202). Digital storytelling projects achieve their greatest effectiveness by distributing "the capacity to tell important stories about oneself—to represent oneself as a social, and therefore potentially political, agent" in a way that publics register, and by then pressing readers to welcome those stories' challenges (Couldry 386).

Visitors to [awwproject.org](http://awwproject.org) encounter editors and writers who create possibilities for reading practices. Readers can follow one woman's writing, focus on clusters organized around themes and events, or browse stories chronologically. Still, editors promote ways of reading through introductory paragraphs on the home page and through their choices about how the essays are presented. By directing readers toward essentializing discourses—like the notion that Afghan women are uniformly silenced—and recognition that privileges difference, project editors conflict with the writers who invite readers to engage in ways that

unsettle neoliberal and neocolonial narratives. My critique lies with the fissures between these editorial frames for Afghan women's stories and writers' own self-representations. The reading practices that editors encourage have political implications, as does their inattention to the collaborative project of knowledge production that creates the story archive.

In examining the connected roles of writers, editors, and readers, I build upon Theresa Kulbaga's critique of the "rhetoric of empathy" in print and film narratives about gender and rights. Memoirs like *Reading Lolita in Tebran* invite readers to "remain in the realm of the individual imagination," affirming similarities and empathizing with Afghan women's desires without "critical reflection or political action" (517). Narratives by—rather than about—Afghan women and girls require imagination and empathy and invite a self-reflexivity from readers that Kulbaga sees as missing from rhetorics of empathy. Like critical witnessing, rhetorical witnessing, and critical empathy, world traveling involves seeing or recognizing the subject and also responding to "the rhetorical options that documentary representations make available to us as witnesses" (Hesford, "Documenting Violations" 106). While these related concepts name processes of engaging the Other as a subject, they do not necessarily entail seeing oneself in the context of another's world. Much of the scholarship on critical or rhetorical witnessing examines these responses in relation to trauma and violence, but Lugones, Madison, and Weir theorize world traveling in the broader terms of daily lived experience. I use world traveling for these reasons and because the notion of a world connects to an element of personal narrative. Writers describe human, cultural, and geographic landscapes, effectively portraying worlds that readers enter, albeit metaphorically and temporarily. Readers do not see the world through the writer's eyes, but instead see the world that she actively, purposefully narrates.

Travel carries connotations of tourism, and seeing oneself in the other's world does not necessarily bring about ethical engagement. Hesford cites Lugones in her caution "to be mindful of how rhetorical acts of witnessing may function as new forms of international tourism and appropriation" ("Documenting Violations" 121). Lugones differentiates tourism from travel, and I agree that world traveling does not actually take place if readers "do not travel epistemically to different realities but are rather involved in narcissism" (Lugones 20). Dissonant stories "that are not confessional and do not seek sympathy"—that remain unresolved and unsettling to the reader—offer one possibility for foreclosing tourism (Gilmore 157). Such stories challenge readers and may initiate epistemic travel unless the editor or another actor offers the rhetorical options of spectatorship or sponsorship instead.



By publishing writers' stories in their own voices and preserving their decisions about self-representation, the project joins writers like Lila Abu-Lughod, Karima Bennouna, and the Sangtin Writers Collective, in making public stories that are rarely heard or seen. Research on genres like *testimonios* demonstrates the transformative work of storytelling and probes the tension between individual and collective identity (Beverly; Schaffer and Smith). Like social media campaigns, digital storytelling projects speak out to break prevailing silences, but they develop slowly and allow for longer stories and complex meanings. However, neoliberal conceptions of feminism account for much of the cultural currency of life writing. As Leigh Gilmore writes, "In networks through which 'human rights and narrated lives' circulate, the individual comes increasingly to represent the rights-bearing construct synonymous with the human." The visibility of deserving victims "functions as a concession to the actual harm they experience from state-sanctioned violence" (8). Their exposure to violence and unequal access to justice are often the sources of interest in their stories; narrators like Heroine Anonymous become more compelling when telling stories is their only recourse. The "autobiographical account par excellence of the rise"—including *AWWP*'s account of the rise in process or the thwarted rise—celebrates individuals and their choices (Gilmore 9). Digital storytelling projects have the potential to influence public debates, but editors risk subsuming personal stories within the neoliberal narratives that Gilmore describes. They benefit from attending to the conditions within which the stories and the project as a whole gain audiences. They also benefit from approaching collaborations between editors, mentors, and writers "with a continued commitment to reflexivity about one's position, motivations, and aims" (Desai et al. 60).

#### SPECTATORSHIP, SPONSORSHIP, AND WORLD TRAVELING IN HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY

"To tell one's story is a human right." The *Afghan Women's Writing Project* uses this statement as its motto, a consistent frame for each text. Doing so positions spectatorship by readers and literacy sponsorship by readers and staff as two avenues to help writers recognize the rights that Afghan institutions deny them. However, this ambitious claim reveals an underlying narrative of crisis and rescue. Offering readers spectatorship and sponsorship as two models for engagement obscures the writers' agency and the histories and geopolitics that connect readers in the United States and United Kingdom to women in Afghanistan. Furthermore, positioning spectatorship and sponsorship as forms of advocacy promotes a disingenuously simple message about writing and rights that contradicts the stories many participants compose.

The language of human rights pervades *AWWP*'s description of its history, goals, and practices. US-based writer Masha Hamilton founded the project in May 2009, conceiving of writing workshops as humanitarian interventions on behalf of Afghan women and girls. While working as a journalist in the Middle East, Hamilton assumed that "not only were women hidden beneath burqas, but their stories were silenced" (Hamilton). She aligns the project with organizations that work for more material human rights: "I had come to believe that telling our own stories is as important to a certain kind of survival as food and shelter." Hamilton explains that we should care about *AWWP* writing because "in telling their own stories, we've seen these women gather strength, courage, and self-confidence." Participants "gain computer literacy and skills of language and critical thinking, which increases their job-related skills." Some use their writing, "shepherded" by mentors, for job and school applications; some become lawyers, journalists, and parliament members. Hamilton cites both concrete and less tangible effects of writing, conflating "freedom and democracy with technological progress and capitalism" (Queen 477). Her description supposes that participants lack agency prior to the workshop and gain empowerment by learning professional skills. Furthermore, it offers these results—empowerment and gaining skills—as the reasons why Western readers (Hamilton's "we") should take notice.

*AWWP* quotes writers who use similar terms to describe the value that life writing has for them. The page "What *AWWP* Means: Our Writers Speak" quotes Sabira explaining,

This project supports Afghan women by showing they are as important as other women in the world. It shows the world that even though Afghan women faced lots of problems, they didn't lose their ability or courage. It shows the kindness of American women who spend their precious time working for the development of their Afghan sisters.

Hamilton's and Sabira's statements invite readers to envision a transfer of confidence and critical thinking skills from US and UK women to Afghan women whose courage and agency needs only to be developed through contact with mentors and readers. Both reaffirm a universalizing narrative of Afghan women in crisis, the "ideological freight" from which this project takes shape (Brandt 20). Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall write especially persuasively that "the vulnerable and racialized girl in crisis has become the focus of human rights campaigns, corporate philanthropy, and service learning projects" (667). In these conversations, "various publics are incited to imagine themselves as empowered to rescue these girls" by supporting education, empowerment, and ultimately their rise out of poverty and disenfranchisement (683). Similarly,

*AWWP* presents writers as equally silenced before joining a workshop and equally liberated afterward.

*AWWP* describes an intervention, or rescue, based on the rights participants gain by writing and audience pleasure in reading. "By giving Afghan women an opportunity and a forum," editors announce, "we're opening a window onto their lives as well as helping them achieve a right they've been denied for decades" ("FAQs"). Through these "windows," readers peer at unfamiliar lives that are offered as spectacles of oppression and inequality. They encourage Afghan women "writing in secret" who "have to go to great lengths to get their poems, essays and stories to us" ("Get Involved"). Framing poetry, testimonies, and journalism as steps toward gaining human rights positions site visitors as rescuers when they comment or donate. Donors enjoy knowing that they support the workshops, the website, and the material conditions that allow remote writers to submit their stories.

*AWWP*'s claim to enable human rights directs readers to interpret complex accounts of power and agency within a rhetoric of empowerment that recalls the consciousness-raising of white middle-class feminism. As the example of Heroine Anonymous indicates, life narratives can lead to affective responses from readers. However, to claim that the very act of telling one's story is a human right minimizes writers' demands for social, political, and educational reform. Equating human rights with personal narrative also precludes serious discussion of law and politics in Afghanistan and ends the dialogue before inviting readers' analyses of their complicities in systems of oppression and violence. Hamilton's description of empowerment and skills, in particular, reflects a "neoliberal model" that focuses "on individual economic advancement and tend[s] to follow a therapeutic and emotional political project that places emphasis on personal decisions and affective connections over a feminist definition of women's empowerment that considers how broader contexts influence individual women" (Dingo, *Networking Arguments* 108). Holding up writing workshops as a sufficient intervention imposes a smooth surface that obscures colonial histories, military interventions, and political currents that disempower women in Afghanistan.

The slogan "To Tell One's Story Is a Human Right" also works rhetorically to declare *AWWP* as a rescuer of silenced and disempowered women and girls rather than as a collaborator. *AWWP* claims that the workshops simultaneously grant women long-denied rights and open windows through which readers gain access to life stories. In this formulation, mentors and staff rescue Afghan women and girls—who are all silenced and prevented from speaking about their lives—by helping them to write for an online public. Financial sponsorship is only one form of reader rescue; literacy sponsorship, or providing an audience to which a story can be told, offers another form. However, spectatorship and

sponsorship—"speaking and paying"—both shrink political and cultural issues "to the scale of manageable individual response" (Gilmore 124). Furthermore, responding to writers or repeating their stories is "detached from action," and makes no obvious demand upon the spectator (Boltanski 19). Donating money is a clearer form of action and sacrifice but maintains a distance between the spectator and the sufferer: "the donor does not follow [the donation]" (18). Ultimately, sponsorship and spectatorship models do not require readers to examine their own positions or to understand the contexts in which Afghan women live.

However, the multivoiced, nonsequential site content means that *AWWP* participants also have the power to shape reading practices. In contrast to the project's editorial apparatus, personal narratives invite readers to engage in a world-traveling model. Readers using this method begin developing an understanding of Afghan women (and non-Western women more broadly) that centers the writers' subjectivities and self-representations. Beyond the individual reader, a storytelling project structured to encourage this reading practice amplifies Afghan women's voices in public conversations about their rights and voices and moves the roles of editors and readers to the periphery. Abu-Lughod echoes these goals when she promotes listening instead of the sponsorship models that equate donating \$10 to rights advocacy. With Lugones, Madison, and Weir in mind, I conceive of world traveling as a reading practice steeped in humility: a willingness to learn about another's world through her self-representation rather than my prior frames of references and available narratives, to reconsider my position and commitments, and to imagine how I appear when set in the context of another's world. Writers and editors might begin to facilitate this type of reading by prompting site visitors to notice what writers decide to share and where they choose to focus. In contrast to identification that assumes sameness or incorporates the Other's difference without change to the reader, such a reading asks for self-reflexivity. "Changing who I am" means that I return with new knowledge of—and possibly resistance to—dominant ideologies and narratives that the writers' stories demand I notice (Weir, *Identities and Freedom* 78).

Digital storytelling projects facilitate this exchange by making public first-person accounts through which readers metaphorically "travel" to the part of the writer's world she chooses to make visible. Identification offers only one form of response; through listening, readers might recognize the ways they do not identify with the writer or the ways their frameworks for interpreting experience fail to account for dissonant stories, like those of Heroine Anonymous, which rupture the crisis and rescue narrative and remain unresolved. A writer's descriptions of geography, culture, and patterns of daily life might invite the reader to imagine moving in that world. Personal narrative, which values a distinct first-person perspective and everyday details, is especially suited to the process of getting

to know the other and “listen[ing] more closely” to the ideals and experiences she holds as important (Abu-Lughod 202). Reading carefully—noting writers’ creative decisions and their connections between individual experiences and those of their communities—I recognize the incongruity between what these writers say and the narratives of human rights that I have encountered in previous reading. I also recognize that they speak about rights and reforms in ways that do not match *AWWP*’s descriptions or flatter my role as a reader.

While the editorial vision deploys the idea of individual human rights uncritically, a separate discussion of rights and freedom takes place in the writers’ stories. *AWWP* describes the mission in terms of help offered to women and girls and the individual benefit to each writer who is given the means to claim her rights. Writers, in contrast, express their hopes to help other women and girls by telling their stories to an online public. Essays written on the occasion of the disputed 2014 Afghan presidential election remind readers that the rights to physical safety and self-determination in matters like marriage are by no means assured. Aysha notes that voting represents progress, but reflects that “there are still places in Afghanistan where women get treated like animals. . . . They don’t know that there is something called rights that belong to them” (“Change”). Many voice their calls for reform in terms of human rights. Marzia writes, “As a woman and citizen, I want my future president to respect women’s rights and uphold equal rights for women under Article 22 of the [Afghan] constitution. . . . My president must respect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and maintain a relationship with our international supporters.” Zakia regards Afghan women as prominent actors in this struggle:

The increase in the number of women running clearly shows the improvement of awareness and commitment of women. It shows women are feeling more responsible for their rights and the need to be represented in the political process and we hope to have a very high rate of voting by women on Election Day.

As Dingo argues, such “contextual evidence can help to break down the taken-for-granted megarethorical narrative of growth and progress through financial agency that the term ‘empowerment’ has come to carry.” Personal narrative provides such contextual evidence to convey the lived experiences not always visible in megarethorical narrative, opening the possibility of “understanding the transnational economic, political, and social connections between nations and cultures—the very project of transnational feminism” (“Turning the Tables” 178).

Examples from writings on International Human Rights Day 2014 illustrate the writers’ focus on collective, rather than individual, change. The Kabul Writers together composed a poem, declaring “I cannot celebrate now, cannot taste

sweetness / until no people suffer, no warlord attacks, no terrorist kills. / I must share all women's pain in the world, with the world." Pari likewise envisions rights that extend beyond her individual experience: "We remove violence by strengthening women. We step toward freedom when many of us—you, my dear sister—join us in the fight. Then my dear country Afghanistan will no longer be the worst place for women, but a good place for Afghan women to live." These writers portray life stories as a way to fight for social and legal change, not self-realization, and do not discuss human rights in terms of individuals who advance. This argument, like the Kabul Writers' choice of a collective voice, counters the neoliberal life narrative of a prevailing individual who overcomes historical and systemic harm through "pluck, perseverance, and enterprise" (Gilmore 89). Instead of the deserving, resilient woman trading on the cultural currency of personal narrative to change her socioeconomic position, these texts use the first-person *I* and individual stories to testify to widespread injustice.

*AWWP* writers' visions resist the project's emphasis on individual writers and decontextualized writing workshops. Writers who raise the issue of human rights in Afghanistan are empowered to speak truth to power at the time that they write—not after writing or because of writing. They ask readers to acknowledge each writer's experience and resistant agency instead of her oppression when she intertwines her life story with a call for equal human rights. Several writers detail the failures of laws and government in no uncertain terms. Pari invites readers ("you, my dear sister") to see themselves as implicated in this reform, active in strengthening women, and even compelled to reevaluate their assent to the conditions for women in Afghanistan. These writers articulate their roles as political actors who bear witness to injustice, demand change from their leaders, and call for participation from their readers.

### "INSIDE BURQA" OR "OUT IN THE WORLD"?

Marzia confronts the question of human rights through the language of religion: "On this Human Rights Day, we must understand that to remain quiet about women who are marginalized, violated, insulted, humiliated, raped, and killed is a sin." For her and other writers, debates about rights intersect with discussions about gender and Islam. In a December 2013 story collection inspired by a prompt asking what it means to be a Muslim woman, writers invoke human rights to define the religion. Nasima differentiates between "real Islam"—which teaches respect for human rights and "an attitude of justice"—and "the reality in Afghanistan." Officials ignore crimes against women and children, and "when women want their rights recognized, they are seen as bad women." She links failures to protect human rights with inauthentic faith, in which daily prayer

is “more a habit than real prayer!” Aysha makes a similar distinction between what Islam teaches and the way “Muslim rules are twisted” and maintains that Islamic law is the basis for “the women of Afghanistan to fight for their rights” (“In Afghanistan”).

*AWWP* editors and writers alike use the conspicuous, controversial blue burqa as a visible sign of this political form of Islam. The differences in their rhetoric around the fraught issue of apparel provide the clearest example of when the project’s frame contradicts writers’ views. *AWWP* staff members invoke the burqa as a symbol of the many cultural restrictions that they hope writing will correct. Hamilton traces the project’s origin to her observation that “not only were women hidden beneath burqas, but their stories were silenced,” imposing an equivalence that structures the online public’s engagement with this issue. Many writers do link the burqa to social imperatives and laws that deny human rights: Asma writes, “Burqa kept me in prison/ And behind a man-made window.” However, their critiques convey very different messages than do the *AWWP* editors. Whereas *AWWP* uses the burqa as a symbol of the tangle of political, religious, and cultural views from which women need rescue, many writers raise the topic as a strategic starting point to analyze culture and politics.

In the previous section I showed how promoting spectatorship and sponsorship frames human rights with a gendered crisis and rescue narrative. Here, I want to explore the ways world traveling reframes debates about the burqa and refocuses on *AWWP* writers’ self-narration. Simply put, a world-traveling reading leaves me more curious than spectatorship and sponsorships, which both reflect back to me and my prior knowledge. A world-traveling reading practice engages with a writer’s sense of self in her own world (Madison 124). In narratives about conservative dress, a reader suspends assumptions that are based on media representations and instead centers the views writers articulate and the details they select to share. I contend that this way of encountering *AWWP* texts opens more creative readings and potentially more transformative and ethical engagements than spectatorship or sponsorship allow, but in this section I also attend to possible limitations of travel as a model for reading.

Asma’s poem “Inside Burqa” expresses ambiguity. She compares the garment to a prison but describes it as “A sign of respect the women deserve,” which “hides my beauty from those who eye me.” For other writers, the veil symbolizes Afghan officials’ preoccupation with minor issues that distract them from addressing problems these women see as more important. Mariam discovered photos of her mother during the 1970s, when “there was plenty of freedom in the way women dressed,” and asks, “Why should women’s dress be so important? There is too much war going on in our country to have time to consider how women are dressing.” Kamilah concurs: “Instead of making strict rules for

women, it would be much better for us Afghans to make rules for murderers, suicide attackers, rapists, thieves, and other criminals, so that no mother will lose her children in a bomb blast, no father will be killed by the Taliban, and no orphan child will die for lack of food.” The narratives I quote here connect the burqa to generational change and political climate, asking readers to learn about the practice in terms of that world, rather than through a lens of Western feminism or what Abu-Lughod calls “gendered Orientalism” (88).<sup>1</sup> I am particularly struck by Mariam’s mention of her mother’s photos, which leads me to see this writer as someone conscious of the ebb and flow of laws and norms. The details of Mariam’s story make me dwell on the unresolved frustration of knowing that earlier generations experienced more freedoms and having a daily visual reminder that law and society do not progress toward equality. She decides how to dress within this context, regarding the veil as an accommodation to “superstitious tradition” rather than a meaningful choice. I am also pressed to read about gender equality advocates in Afghanistan who resisted these changes, and I wonder what relationship the conservative Christianity that shapes US domestic politics has to other conservative religious movements (Grewal and Kaplan 20). In this case, my changes are small shifts, and the things I learn are subtle clarifications—perhaps knowledge other readers already have. Still, by looking to understand Mariam in terms of her world, rather than as evidence on one side of a debate, I “cross a boundary” in myself and begin the conceptual work that precedes feminist coalition (Gilmore 132).

The reader who is open to being changed by encountering the stories of Afghan women might notice how often discussions of the burqa and women’s status begin not with statements about oppression or rights, but with declarations of “what matters”—and, crucially, what does not matter. Kamilah disputes Asma’s notion that veiling protects women. She argues that this is a misconception and that “It doesn’t matter if a woman wears a *hijab*, a burqa, a small scarf, or tight jeans—the men bother her all the same.” Tasala echoes Kamilah’s assertion that women’s clothing has little practical importance:

For them it does not matter,  
 even if I wear a burqa; I am still just a girl to them.  
 If I wear a big scarf I am just a girl.  
 A girl to be used by men to make them happy.  
 A girl who doesn’t have the right to choose.

Like Kamilah, Tasala treats defenses of the burqa as misleading. At best, they say, claims that the garments protect women’s dignity ignore the reality of their experiences; at worst, these claims deceive and manipulate. In Tasala’s poem,



the list of violations against her freedom and safety overshadow the significance of the burqa. Rather than resist clothing that conceals the body, Afghan women writers resist the immense symbolic meaning given to the veil.

In contrast to these writers, *AWWP* editors portray the burqa as mattering a great deal. A paragraph on the *AWWP* homepage gives an overview of the project, titled “Out of the Burqa, Into the World.” This introduction says nothing about the burqa or even about women’s dress. The title serves only to portray women as concealed, oppressed, and silenced, and to connect *AWWP*’s mission to political and academic conversations about gender and Islam. Moreover, this title equates the burqa with exclusion from the public sphere, which the opportunity to write for an online audience “in the world” will correct. In “academic literature on women and Islam,” Dohra Ahmad observes, “the veil often takes on a synecdochical role as a stand-in for an imposed religious identity” (109). For *AWWP*, the veil also stands in for silence, lack of identity, and lack of agency. My critique of *AWWP* editors’ rhetorical uses of human rights and the burqa shares much with Dingo’s critique of the microfinance organization Kiva and the aid organization CARE, which use exoticized images without any broader context of global poverty to “give donors a sense of individual accomplishment and connection to the global community” (“Turning the Tables” 180). Dingo contrasts Kiva and CARE with documentaries in which women from the Global South address US audiences and speak directly to the camera about their specific circumstances and needs (189). This contrasting approach uses techniques that are integral to digital storytelling—personal narratives speak directly about the details of individual lives—and points to the potential that story projects hold.

The *AWWP* website takes advantage of the visually striking head-to-toe blue burqa to signal women’s oppression and in place of actual knowledge of laws, traditions, or those women’s opinions of the practice. Editors pair most stories with photos of women in burqas or headscarves, worn-looking mothers, arid landscapes, protests, and armed militants. These images use a visual shorthand for the foreignness of Afghan culture and the oppression of women, even when corresponding stories explore entirely different themes. The veil has been widely discussed in academic studies, news media, and legal debate, but it continues to “evoke mixed emotions of fear, hostility, derision, curiosity, and fascination” (Macdonald 8). To facilitate the more ethical practice of world traveling, editors might acknowledge those emotions and bring to light some readers’ propensities to define Western feminism in relation to restrictions on women elsewhere. Lugones holds that world traveling is neither a “middle-class leisurely journey” nor a colonial or imperialist journey; this reading practice is difficult and involves “risking one’s ground” (98). If that ground is a firm position

on the ethics or morality of the burqa, then stories that downplay its importance ask readers to rethink why this symbol carries such weight.

Kelly Oliver's critique of world traveling points to the class privilege inherent in this way of reading. Oliver writes:

Willful world traveling, especially with a playful attitude, is the privilege of those who are constructed as dominant in any given world. Those who are marginal do not have a choice about traveling and cannot do so playfully. . . . This unacknowledged power hierarchy deflects the need to change social institutions (which create the power structure) onto personal and individual attitudes and relationships. (53)

In posing world traveling as an alternative to spectatorship or sponsorship, I have tried to show how this model of engagement asks readers not to see themselves only as benefactors. I agree that it echoes existing inequalities. However, personal narratives and the worlds writers portray can make inequalities newly, necessarily, and productively visible to readers whose previous knowledge of Afghan woman and girls was filtered through Western media narratives and the gatekeepers controlling access to publication. *AWWP*, and organizations like it, earn their greatest significance in their potential to change and challenge readers, not in rescuing writers. I hope (maybe idealistically) this reading facilitates the conceptual work needed to change social and political institutions in the United States.

The statement "Out of the Burqa, Into the World" glosses writers' experiences, treating them as symbols of oppression rather than as subjects, and conflicting with the actual diversity their narratives display. Women like Shakila—who travels abroad, works at a Kabul university, and pays for her sisters' educations—were in the world as students and professionals before they joined *AWWP*. To be sure, Afghan women are far from united in their views of the veil. Several writers express frustration or anger, others prefer to wear one, and many never mention any type of veil. The multitude of voices that appear together on the website present contrasting positions in conversation. Rather than defend their right to go without the veil, *AWWP* writers assert their right to decide what does and does not matter in discussions of women's role in Afghan politics and society. Asma's elegant claim to integrity and identity stands out within this array of voices. She sums up the writers' collective resistance to the overdetermined symbol of the concealed Muslim woman's body: "I am the same,/ with or without burqa." World traveling readers who encounter her poem might question the importance they attribute to the burqa and might see that writers call for attention to the local problems that matter to them instead.

## CONCLUSION

The emergence of digital storytelling sites indicates that autobiographical writing earns its current popularity by creating connections between far-flung readers and audiences and by linking personal experiences to public conversations. Not all projects state commitments to gender equality or social change, but those that do reveal a developing alliance between online personal narratives and feminist activism. Mary Queen asks, "In what ways do digital circulations of texts detach texts from their contexts or make those contexts less important than the frameworks in which they circulate?" (485–6). In this article, I have tried to show how editors introduce frameworks of spectatorship and sponsorship that shrink political and social inequalities to the scale of individual challenges that readers can help to resolve. Writers portray contexts, and by attending to these "worlds" readers encounter their more complete, complicated self-representations. The *Afghan Women's Writing Project* exemplifies the challenges of building transnational feminist coalitions using life writing, one of "the most ardent hosts of the human rights spectacle" (Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics* 19). Bringing personal narratives to a public audience can be a powerful tool in creating transnational feminist connections, but organizations promoting storytelling as a humanitarian intervention risk framing their causes as missions to rescue women perpetually in crisis.

For *AWWP* writers, "the possibility to be seen as a subject with a public, political voice" is contingent upon site editors and readers who receive their claims and the "acknowledged intersubjectivities" between editors and readers (McKinnon 192). Such projects might "provide a self-critique," and a statement "acknowledging and emphasizing that knowledge production is always based on and shaped by unequal relations of power" (Desai, Bouchard, and Detournay 60). By reflecting on the asymmetries inherent in their project, *AWWP* editors could ask readers to listen and to be open to changing themselves. Editors could also provide contextual evidence, foregrounding US involvement in Afghanistan or Western media narratives of Afghan women. If *AWWP* editors decide to be active in introducing women's stories, they might use that space to introduce a wider view. Stating this ethic, or highlighting writers' positions on military interventions in Afghanistan, would ask readers to reflect on their complicity with global systems of power and with mainstream representations of Afghan women.

Design decisions by site editors could also expand avenues for self-representation. A few photos by *AWWP* participants appear on a photos page of the website, and this section might expand in ways that protect the anonymity and safety of participants. Writers might also play with pairing textual narratives

and images. Human rights discourses often rely upon an “ocular epistemology” that privileges visual documentation (as Hesford explains, “seeing is believing”), but visuals also function as personal narratives (*Spectacular Rhetorics* 185). I have in mind here not corroborating verbal accounts, documenting oppressions, or creating self-portraits, but instead choosing photos that add dimensions to—even complicate—their stories. Publishing photos by Afghan women creates a public platform for this additional form of narrative and develops a skill that complements the writing and computer abilities they hone in workshops. Certainly, writers might choose to deploy a visual rhetoric of spectacle. Like textual self-representations that are not authentic in any straightforward way but rather constructed, multiple narratives and influences would inform participants’ photos. Because these photos would be at risk of the same framing and circulation that directs interpretations of written narratives, editorial gestures that direct readers to focus on writers’ purposeful self-representations remain crucial. No single approach is ideal. However, using *AWWP* participants’ own photos or selections of images would contextualize women’s stories and would incorporate additional storytelling forms that reflect the creators’ subjectivities and decisions.

Furthermore, digital storytelling projects might present each essay or poem as a personal and constructed text without claiming close parallels between writers’ stories and broader debates or international campaigns. Arifa’s story “Marrying Young in Afghanistan” appears alongside a still from the 2013 CNN documentary *Girl Rising* and is reproduced on the website for Breakthrough, an organization working against child marriage but based in India rather than Afghanistan. The impulse to state this connection explicitly is understandable, but it equates the practice of child marriage in Afghanistan to the practice in India. Situating writers’ stories as part of larger movements also implies that Afghan women’s specific concerns are most valuable when they represent or intersect with larger humanitarian campaigns.

Digital storytelling projects, as *AWWP* shows us, create dynamic and border-crossing opportunities for connecting Western readers and non-Western writers. In online spaces, writers can tell stories with comparatively little mediation from editors and publishers. Personal narratives resist imposed frames and resist readers’ easy engagements as spectators or sponsors, demanding more complicated responses. By narrating personal experiences, digital storytelling creates occasions for transformative world traveling and for transnational dialogues about gender, rights, and freedoms.

## NOTES

1. Abu-Lughod explains that in the nineteenth century “women of the Orient were either portrayed as downtrodden victims” or “they appeared in a sensual world of excessive sexuality.” She adds that contemporary writing echoes these themes in protagonists “with feminist ideals who do not want to remain trapped in their strange and sordid worlds” (88). Ahmad describes these figures as “introspective, outspoken, strong willed,” a “shadowy sister-self to the American female, if not feminist, reader” (108).

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